

Is the Future Primitive?

Essay for HEL YES! Catalogue commissioned by Finnish Institute London August 2010.

I've always had a rather romantic view of Helsinki, and with the tunnel vision of a blinkered horse have managed to keep it that way. I first visited in the mid 1990s and was knocked out by the way that sea, city and sky, urbanism and nature bleed amorphously together and water appears where you least expect it. I was enchanted by massively rusticated buildings decorated with elfin heads and sprouting lacy tendrils characteristic of Finland's savagely romantic take on Art Nouveau, and by Eliel Saarinen's muscular train station guarded by its bionic cavemen. I remember the simplicity of Alvar Aalto's studio, and eating surreally named 'cloudberries' and 'bleak roe' in the Savoy restaurant he designed. And I recall the brutal beauty of the Rock Church that is as dramatic as a Mayan temple but in aerial photos disappears back into Helsinki's rocky outcrop.

You might ask what this has to do with Helsinki as World Design Capital 2012. Globally design still tends to be regarded as an urban, industrialized and ultimately consumable pursuit. Helsinki has this side, and in spades in the flourishing central design district. But these are icing on the deeper concerns of Finnish design.

If there is something we outsiders might learn from Helsinki in 2012 and beyond, I'd argue that it is Finnish design's profoundly human dimension, the deeply embedded belief that design is for everybody and a part of everyday life, and the holistic connection between man and the environment. In 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', the hugely sympathetic elderly architect Juhani Pallasmaa observes 'Modernist design at large has housed

the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless. ‘

From my visit to last year's Helsinki Design Week, the things that have stuck with me stood out for their sensitive psychological connection to the environment. I am thinking of Wisa Wooden Design Hotel by Pieta-Linda Auttila temporarily built in the Harbour. In reality more of a cabin than a hotel, the expressive design treats wood with an unexpected lightness. The designer describes how she imagined a rectangular wooden block that washed up on a huge wave and crashed onto the rocks. The end boxes remained intact while the central part has been pulled apart like strands of spaghetti and stretched out to form the swooping sculptural wooden trellis.

As an extreme hydrophilic, I enjoyed the sauna design competition in the Habitare Furniture Fair. Sauna Savu by Putte Huima and Otso Virtanen, brought the feel of a traditional chimneyless smoke sauna to modern sauna bathing by using charred wood so the interior has a dark sooty surface and the scent of smoke. Kyly by Ville Hara and Anu Puustinen of Avanto Architects is a series of massively solid timber boxes as a setting for the stages of sauna ritual - undressing, steaming, washing and cooling off. What struck me was a direct connection to ancient bathing rituals that seems almost primordial.

While these are immensely likeable projects, they still seem to exist in the long shadow of Nordic modernism. But there is also an edgier more mutant approach at play in the cross-pollination of nature and urbanism. Kalasatama - the former harbour area in Eastern Helsinki that is now in the process of becoming the city's largest residential development - has been turned into a site for peripatetic arts events. Temporary events like the exhibition of giant asphalt paintings by Napa Illustrations animate the gritty industrial landscape in the process of transformation while the port buildings, boats and old boilers are dismantled. Containers are put to an amazing array of new uses and vegetable plots sprout amidst tarmac.

Perhaps there is something in this future primitive? In a similar vein, HEL YES! proposes to explore ways to build bridges from the past to the present and asks 'can something new come out of foraging the old'? Whether through reclaiming cast-off objects or by sending out hunter gathers to source food in London. These are all small touches, but still the ethos and sensibility they tap into could have greater relevance to our future. Sitting in contaminated and congested central London, I reflect on the fact that while we flounder in the recent binge of alienating glass buildings and struggle to rebalance our precarious relationship to nature, in Helsinki a sense of connection still seems to come naturally.